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ABSTRACT

This study examined relationships between different types of parental conflict (legal conflict, interpersonal conflict, and specific conflict tactics) and children's divorce adjustment. Subjects were members of 120 mother-custody families, recruited through a search of public divorce dockets, with at least one child between the ages of 6 and 12 and in which parental separation had occurred within the past 6 months. Subjects were seen once between 6 and 8 months after the separation and again one year later. Conflict variables from multiple sources, including interviews, questionnaires, and court records, were correlated with children's adjustment variables, which also were assessed using multiple sources (self-report, mother report, and teacher report). Relationships between the different types of parental conflict and children's adjustment were examined within each time period and over time. Results suggest that different types of conflict are related to children's adjustment early and later in the divorce adjustment process. Age, sex, and legal status of the parents' divorce moderated relationships between parental conflict and children's adjustment. The divorce settlement may mark a transition for children, lessening the impact of parental conflict. (NB)

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Parental Conflict and Children's Divorce Adjustment: A Multimethod Approach[1]

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This study examines relationships between different types of parental conflict (e.g., legal conflict, interpersonal conflict, and specific conflict tactics) and children's divorce adjustment, using data from a large longitudinal project. Subjects were members of 120 mother-custody families, recruited through a search of public divorce dockets, with at least one child between the ages of six and twelve and in which parental separation had occurred within the past six months. Subjects were seen once between six and eight months after the separation and again one year later. Conflict variables from multiple sources, including interviews, questionnaires, and court records, were correlated with children's adjustment variables, which were also assessed using multiple sources (self-report, mother report, and teacher report). Relationships between the different types of parental conflict and children's adjustment were examined within each time period and over time. Results suggest that different types of conflict are related to children's adjustment early and later in the divorce adjustment process. Age, sex, and legal status of the parents' divorce moderated relationships between parental conflict and children's adjustment. Results are interpreted by considering the impact of different types of parental conflict during the divorce process, the different social circumstances of children of different ages and sexes in mother-custody families, and gender differences in reporting adjustment problems (for self-reports) or in attributing illness and behavior problems (for mothers' and teachers' reports). The divorce settlement may mark a transition for children, lessening the impact of parental conflict.

Research on the impact of parental divorce has clearly identified parental conflict as an important predictor of children's adjustment problems (see, e.g., Camara & Resnick, 1989; Emery, 1988). However, parental conflict is multifaceted and takes different forms among divorcing couples (Goldsmith, 1980). It may be important, therefore, to examine relationships between different types of conflict (e.g., legal conflict, conflict involving physical aggression, or family members' perceptions of interpersonal conflict between the parents) and children's adjustment. Children's adjustment to divorce is also multifaceted, including their emotional responses, physical symptoms, and behavior in a variety of settings and in the eyes of themselves, their parents, and their teachers. Because these different facets may not always present the same picture (see, e.g., Kurdek, Blisk, & Siesky, 1981), it is important to use multiple assessments of children's adjustment as well. This study examines relationships between different types of parental conflict assessed with multiple methods (including court records of legal conflict, mothers' questionnaire and interview reports of specific conflict tactics, and family members' reports of interpersonal conflict) and children's divorce adjustment, also assessed with multiple measures (interview and questionnaire data from children, mothers, and teachers). These relationships were examined at two different points during the divorce process (once 6-8 months after parental separation and again one year later) in order to understand changes over time.

Relationships between parental conflict and adjustment were examined among different groups of children in order to discover whether the status of the parents' divorce, or children's age and sex, would moderate these relationships. It seemed reasonable to expect that the divorce settlement might mark an important transition for children. For example, once the divorce is settled, children might feel more secure, less threatened by parental conflict, or they might be more oriented toward the new family structure than toward parental conflict.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were mothers and children in 120 white mother-custody families, recruited through a search of public divorce dockets in five counties in the greater Boston area, in which there was at least one child between the ages of six and twelve and in which parental separation had

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occurred within the past six months. When there was more than one child between these ages in a family, one was chosen as the "focus child" for the study, but all were interviewed. Of the original 120 families, 97 returned one year later.

Procedure

Mothers and children were interviewed separately (mothers in an office and children in a playroom), and mothers filled out a number of questionnaires, once between six and eight months after the separation and again one year later.

Parental conflict was assessed using objective court records of legal conflict, mothers' reports of conflict tactics from questionnaires (conflict tactics used by both spouses) and interviews (an indicator of fathers' use of violence, since in most cases mothers did not report using this tactic themselves), and family reports of interpersonal conflict from interviews (See Table 1.). For variables coded from interviews, coding definitions and judgments were discussed until raters attained interrater reliability above .85; random spot checks of coding were performed to ensure that reliability was maintained at or above this level.

Children's adjustment was assessed using data from children's interviews (psychological adjustment), from mothers' questionnaire responses (illness, behavior problems) and from teachers' questionnaire responses (behavior problems). Definitions of these variables are shown in Table 2. The three main areas of adjustment (psychological adjustment, physical illness, and behavior problems) were generally uncorrelated; i.e., they appeared to represent different facets of children's adjustment.

Results

Correlations between measures of parental conflict and measures of children's adjustment for the entire sample of children appear in Table 3. Relationships are shown for Year 1 (within-time) and for Year 2 (over-time, i.e., Year 1 conflict predicting Year 2 adjustment, and within-time, i.e., Year 2 conflict and Year 2 adjustment).

At Year 1, several indicators of aggressive conflict (the number of legal motions for vacating or restraining orders, CTS verbal aggression and violence scores, and mothers' reports of their husbands' violence) were related to behavior problems at home and at school. The only result which was inconsistent with this pattern was a trend for CTS verbal reasoning scores to be related to behavior problems at school Parental conflict was generally unrelated to children's psychological adjustment or to their physical illness, with the exception of a trend for family reports of parental conflict to be related to children's illness.

At Year 2, children's behavior problems at home showed persistent effects of legal motions for vacating or restraining orders and of CTS verbal aggression (trend), and behavior problems at school showed a long-term effect of CTS violence. Family reports of parental conflict at this time were related to poor psychological adjustment and to behavior problems at school.

Divorce Status at Year 2. Relationships between parental conflict and children's adjustment at Year 2 were explored separately for children whose parents had settled the divorce by Year 2 (about half of the sample) and those whose parents had not (See Table 4.). The adjustment of children whose parents had settled the divorce was generally unrelated to parental conflict; the only exception was their psychological adjustment, which was related positively to CTS verbal reasoning scores and negatively to family reports of parental conflict at Year 2 (trend). In contrast, children whose parents had not yet settled the divorce showed some long-term effects of earlier parental conflict, and their adjustment was related to concurrent parental conflict. Motions for vacating and restraining orders were correlated negatively with children's psychological adjustment and positively with behavior problems at home. CTS violence scores were related to behavior problems at school, as were family reports of parental conflict (trend; this type of conflict was also higher among these families).

Age and Sex Groups. Significant correlations between parental conflict and children's adjustment variables are shown for different groups of children in Table 5. The adjustment of older children (9 to 12) was less related to parental conflict than that of younger children (6 to 8),

and different patterns of relationships between conflict and adjustment were found for boys and girls.

Among girls, parental conflict was unrelated to behavior problems at either time (girls had fewer school behavior problems, and more illness, than boys). Among younger girls, parental conflict of all types was related to physical illness at both times (including some over-time effects of Year 1 conflict). CTS verbal reasoning scores predicted Year 2 psychological adjustment, which was also negatively correlated with Year 2 family reports of parental conflict. Among older girls, illness at Year 1 was related to the total number of legal motions and to mothers' reports of husbands' violence, and psychological adjustment at Year 2, like that of younger girls, was negatively related to family reports of parental conflict.

Among boys, parental conflict was more strongly related to behavior problems than to psychological adjustment or illness. Younger and older boys' adjustment showed different relationships with custody motions (there were more custody disputes in families with boys): among younger boys at Year 1, custody motions were related to poor psychological adjustment and more behavior problems at school; custody motions at both times were related to Year 2 behavior problems at home. Among older boys at Year 1, however, custody motions were related negatively to illness and to behavior problems at school. Motions for vacating or restraining orders were also correlated with younger boys' Year 1 behavior problems at school. Parents' conflict tactics had over-time effects on both younger and older boys' school behavior problems; younger boys had fewer of these problems if the parents had used verbal reasoning, and older boys had more if the parents had used violence.

Discussion

Parental conflict and children's adjustment problems, each assessed using multiple methods, were clearly related. Conflict involving physical aggression or threats of aggression before the separation or early in the post-separation period (represented by legal motions for vacating or restraining orders and by mothers' reports of violence) seemed most problematic for children; it had both short-term and longer-term effects on behavior problems reported by their mothers and teachers. At Year 2, conflict reported by family members was related to poor psychological adjustment and to behavior problems at school. It is possible that by this time, children were adjusting to the changes occasioned by the separation and paying more attention to the parents' relationship than they had earlier; alternatively, they may have found conflict more disruptive because they were less habituated to it than before the separation, or they may have been disappointed that the separation had not ended parental conflict.

The adjustment of children whose parents had settled the divorce by Year 2 showed almost no relationships with earlier or concurrent parental conflict, possibly because they felt more secure in their post-divorce situations and did not experience continuing parental conflict as threatening, or possibly because their parents had lower levels of some types of conflict than other parents. In contrast, children whose parents had still not settled the divorce continued to show the type of relationship between adjustment and parental conflict, particularly conflict involving physical aggression, which had characterized the whole sample of children at Year 1. Thus, parental conflict had long-term effects only if the legal divorce process was protracted.

Older children's adjustment was less related to parental conflict than that of younger children, possibly because older children had more resources outside the family which served as a buffer. Aggressive conflict was related to adjustment problems in all age and sex groups. Both older and younger boys showed long-term effects of parental conflict tactics on their behavior problems, but they responded differently to legal conflict over custody, possibly because older boys were more eager to live with their fathers than were younger boys. Unlike that of boys, girls' adjustment was related to interpersonal conflict reported by family members. This sex difference is consistent with research suggesting that girls are more sheltered and are socialized to be more oriented to family relationships than boys (Block, 1984). Younger girls appeared to respond to this type of conflict earlier than did older girls. Differences in the type of adjustment problems generally associated with parental conflict (behavior problems among boys, illness and

psychological distress among girls) may reflect differences in specific responses to parental conflict. However, they may also reflect differences in willingness to report various types of problems when parental conflict is high. For example, girls may be more willing than boys to report psychological distress and physical symptoms; mothers and teachers may be more willing to report behavior problems for boys than for girls. Also, in this sample of children in the custody of their mothers, girls may have identified more than boys with the custodial parent, and mothers may have tended to perceive boys' behavior negatively.

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Table 1

Measures of Parental Conflict

Legal conflict (Court records)

Number of legal motions made by the parents from the time of filing for divorce until the time of the interview in each of several categories, coded from court records for Year 1 and Year 2. Categories in these analyses include motions regarding custody, motions for restraining and vacating orders (which may indicate a history of physical confrontations between spouses and their inability to agree on which parent should leave the marital home), and all motions (including the above categories and others, such as motions for support).

Legal status of the divorce (i.e., whether the divorce had been settled in court) by the time of the Year 2 interview was also recorded.

Conflict tactics (Mother report)

Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS; Straus, 1974; Straus, 1979)--adaptation of this questionnaire completed by mothers before the Year 2 interview. Rates on a scale ranging from 0 (never) to 5 (more than once a month) frequency of conflict tactics used by both spouses during last year of marriage. Includes scales for Verbal Reasoning (e.g., "Tried to discuss the issue relatively calmly"), Verbal Aggression (e.g., "Yelled and/or insulted"), and Violence (e.g., "Pushed, grabbed or shoved him/her") between spouses.

Husband violent--coded from mother interview Year 1 (no/yes).

Conflict (Custodial family report)

Aggregate of custodial mother's and children's views of the level of parental conflict, coded from interviews both years (1=low, 2=moderate, 3=high); average of mother's and children's ratings.

Table 2

Measures of Children's Adjustment (Years 1 and 2)

Psychological adjustment (Self-report)

Aggregate of standardized scores on measures administered orally to children at the time of the interview:

(1) the Harter Perceived Competence Scale (Harter, 1982), a measure of self-esteem,

(2) an adaptation of the 20 Symptoms measure of stress symptoms (Veroff, Kulka, & Douvan, 1981), and

(3) responses to interview questions regarding the degree to which they experienced several affects (e.g., sadness, guilt, relief) about the divorce (a lot/a little/not at all).

All three indicators were highly correlated. High scores indicate good adjustment.

Illness (Mother report)

Questionnaire measure of the number of common illnesses the child had experienced over the past 3 months (adapted from Abramson, Terepolsky, Brook, & Kark, 1965, and Wahler, 1973).

Behavior problems (Mother and teacher reports)

Mother and Teacher forms of Achenbach Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach, 1978; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1978; Edelbrock & Achenbach, 1982), which asks to what extent various problems describe the child (not true/somewhat true/very true); e.g., cruelty, aggressive behavior, loneliness, etc. Scores represent totals for all behavior problems. Parent and teacher reports were highly correlated.

Table 3: Correlations Between Conflict and Adjustment, All Children

Conflict Variable (Source)	Self-report Psych. Adj.		Mother report Illness		Mother report Behavior Prob.		Teacher report Behavior Prob.	
Year 1	Year 1	Year 2	Year 1	Year 2	Year 1	Year 2	Year 1	Year 2
Legal (Court records)								
Vacating/restraining	-.15	-.13	-.06	.01	.20*	.23*	.32**	.08
CTS (Mother quest.)								
Reasoning	.11	.17	-.13	-.05	-.08	-.05	.25†	.01
Verbal Aggression	-.04	-.01	-.03	-.10	.29**	.19†	.09	.06
Violence	-.03	-.00	.02	-.16	.20†	.17	.10	.33*
Husb. Violent (Mother)	-.16	-.14	.16	-.01	.12	.02	.25*	-.07
Conflict (Family)	-.07	-.01	.18†	.08	.08	.02	.15	.21
Year 2								
Legal (Court records)								
Vacating/restraining		-.12		.01		.18		.07
Conflict (Family)		-.22*		.07		.14		.26*

Overall N=120 Year 1, 97 Year 2; N's for individual correlations vary due to incomplete data.
†p<.10 *p<.05 **p<.01

Table 4: Correlations Between Conflict and Year 2 Adjustment, By Status of Parents' Divorce (Settled vs. Not Settled by Year 2)

Conflict Variable (Source)	Self-report Psych. Adj.		Mother report Illness		Mother report Behavior Prob.		Teacher report Behavior Prob.	
Year 1	Settled	Not	Settled	Not	Settled	Not	Settled	Not
Legal (Court records)								
Vacating/restraining	.15	-.36*	-.14	.18	.03	.41**	.03	.13
CTS (Mother quest.)								
Reasoning	.37*	-.06	-.13	.05	-.22	.08	.15	-.07
Verbal Aggression	-.22	.21	.05	-.26	.28	.11	-.21	.31
Violence	-.21	.19	-.13	-.21	.15	.19	-.09	.59**
Husb. Violent (Mother)	-.05	-.22	-.19	.19	.05	-.02	-.11	-.02
Conflict (Family)	.01	-.01	-.03	.21	-.08	.12	.22	.20
Year 2								
Legal (Court records)								
Vacating/restraining	.16	-.40**	-.13	.22	-.02	.42**	.03	.12
Conflict (Family)	-.25†	-.11	.10	.03	.13	.18	.18	.35†

Overall N=51 settled, 46 not settled; N's for individual correlations vary due to incomplete data.
†p<.10 *p<.05 **p<.01

Table 5: Correlations Between Conflict and Adjustment, Age and Sex Groups

Conflict Variable (Source)	Self-report Psych. Adj.		Mother report Illness		Mother report Behavior Prob.		Teacher report Behavior Prob.	
Year 1	Year 1	Year 2	Year 1	Year 2	Year 1	Year 2	Year 1	Year 2
Legal (Court records)								
All motions			**.51***			*.43***	***-.48****	
Custody	*-.43**		***-.40****			*.41***	*.49*,**-.49****	
Vacating/restraining			.41*				*.54**	
CTS (Mother quest.)								
Reasoning		.49*	-.42*					*-.48**
Verbal Aggression								
Violence								***.60****
Husb. Violent (Mother)			**.48***	.45*				
Conflict (Family)			.49*	.54*				
Year 2	Year 2		Year 2		Year 2		Year 2	
Legal (Court records)								
All motions				.42*		*.47***		
Custody						*.43**		
Conflict (Family)	-.39*,**-.55****							

Girls 6-8 (Year 1 N=30) **Girls 9-12 (N=28)** *Boys 6-8 (N=29)* ***Boys 9-12 (N=33)***
*p<.05 **p<.01